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**STATECRAFT:  
MANY MODELS, ONE METHOD**

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In *Fundamentals of Statecraft*, we have studied various and competing models for examining international relations: realism and neorealism, idealism and neoidealism, constructivism, functionalism, world federalism, etc., and it seems new models are being introduced every day. More is not always better, however. The true value of any new international relations model lies in its practical consequences: that is, the ability of the model to expose previously unknown or ill-considered opportunities and risks. Such a philosophy, or method, for measuring the value of a model is referred to as *pragmatism*.

Models are used in very nearly every aspect of human endeavor to represent real-world phenomenon under investigation. Models can be useful to gain insights into how things work, or why things happened, but the emphasis in *practical* modeling must remain on utility, rather than in any notion of “correctness.” In this regard, several different models may prove useful in studying complex phenomena. As an example, Barr and Zehna cite the practical use of both wave and particle theories in connection with the study of light phenomena.<sup>1</sup> Each model has proven useful in explaining certain aspects of light behavior where the other failed. Thus, while it is impossible to validate either model as “correct,” the two seemingly contradictory models have been taught and used by physicists for decades.

Modeling in the realm of international relations is like modeling in the realm of physics, except that in the case of international relations, there is less certainty, greater risk, and the laws aren’t obeyed. In the place of one or two models, we have dozens of models spanning every conceivable reality, not one of which is “correct” or even adequate. But as a family of models, they can prove quite useful. To the extent that these models are useful in mapping today’s international realities into tomorrow’s possibilities, American statecraft can be shaped to exploit the exposed opportunities, and mitigate the exposed risks, in pursuit of a working National Security Strategy.

To see how this might work, let us examine two robust, but fundamentally polarized models of international relations: realism and liberalism. While there are many manifestations of these two models, from the traditional to the implausible, each share a defining set of core principals.

*Realism* is the model of international relations which has been most practically applied since the turn of the century. The underlying thesis of realism is that the sovereign nation state will and should always act to enhance its national security by increasing its power vis-à-vis others. A realist subscribes to the notion that to understand the true world order, you must first understand the competition for power at the regional level (referred to as geopolitics). That within each region, each nation state acts to enhance its security by increasing its power (military, economic, and political) with respect to its perceived competitors, and that the result of this quest ought to be a dynamic, but stabilizing, balance of power.<sup>2</sup> Geopolitics can spill over onto the global stage when the spheres of influence of dominant (but destabilizing) regional actors intersect with those of another region. World War II provides a case in point: having achieved nearly absolute dominance over their respective regions, the imperialist designs of Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan precipitated the catastrophic second world war.

At the other end of the spectrum is *liberalism*. Liberalism is descended from the traditional *idealism* advocated by President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson's philosophy was based on the assumption that democracies tend to be more predictable, more rational, and more peace loving than their non-democratic counterparts. Hence the thesis is that the *enlightened* sovereign nation state will and should act to increase its collective security and prosperity within a community of nations by exporting democracy and its attendant values. Dr. Henry Kissinger summarized the basic principals of Wilsonian idealism with these points:

- America's special mission transcends day-to-day diplomacy and obliges it to serve as a beacon of liberty for the rest of mankind

- The foreign policies of democracies are morally superior because their people are inherently peace-loving
- Foreign policy should reflect the same moral standards as personal ethics
- The state has no right to claim a separate morality for itself.<sup>3</sup>

The current suite of liberal philosophies is broader and more egalitarian than the idealism of Wilson's day. In stark contrast to realist ideology, it anticipates the continued erosion of nation state borders and the traditional hierarchies of power in deference to the ascendancy of values and the pursuit of prosperity.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a belief that international relations in the post-cold world must be *peoples* (vice state) centric – in relief of oppression, persecution, poverty, hunger, etc., wherever it exists – is an essential plank in the liberal framework. Another essential plank is an abiding faith in the stabilizing potential of the emerging *globalism*. Globalism is less a philosophy than it is a phenomenon, currently most apparent in the realms of capital, commerce, and information. In theory, the rise of international and transnational corporations and institutions, as well as other non-state actors, adjudicators, and influencers, will *redistribute* the uneven power of states to advance the causes of prosperity and security for some, with a resulting increase in collective prosperity and security for all.

Realists and liberals all point to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War as striking examples of the primacy of their respective ideologies. Liberals will insist that in the final analysis, it was the American ideal of democracy, spread via the irresistible power of globalism, that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union. A realist would argue that such thinking is soft-headed and downright revisionist: that it was President Reagan's renewed investment in our national defense establishments that ultimately broke the back of the Soviet Union. But the pragmatist would argue that the time, energy, and intellect spent in making these ideological arguments is of little value,

if they do not yield for us an “actionable” and improved strategy for American statecraft in the years which lie immediately ahead.

Pragmatism is a philosophical model as old as statecraft itself. The American philosopher William James (1842-1910) is viewed as the father of modern pragmatism, in much the same way as Wilson is viewed as the father of modern idealism. In *Pragmatism: A New Name for Old Ways of Thinking*, pragmatism was presented as a means to reconcile the seemingly intractable disputes between the two predominant schools of philosophy which reigned at the end of the nineteenth century: rationalism and empiricism. These philosophies (or models) were broadly described as such:

Rationalism (going by "principles")

Tender-minded  
Intellectualistic  
Idealistic  
Optimistic  
Religious Free-willist  
Monistic  
Dogmatical

Empiricist (going by "facts")

Tough-minded  
Sensationalistic  
Materialistic  
Pessimistic  
Irreligious  
Pluralistic  
Skeptical<sup>5</sup>

Similarities between this particular dichotomy, and the one which divides liberalism and realism is strictly coincidental.

James viewed pragmatism, not as a static model, but rather as a *method*:

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many? – fated or free? – material or spiritual? – here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.<sup>6</sup>

In James' view, the informed, practicing pragmatist would turn away from abstractions, unyielding principals, and other absolutes and focus on concrete facts, adequacy, and power. Let us apply the method of pragmatism to the models of realism and liberalism in a simplified case study of the ethnic conflict in the Serbian province of Kosovo. With respect to potential American intervention, we will identify the practical opportunities and risks exposed by each model, and determine how each of these two very different models would serve a useful purpose in shaping American statecraft with respect to that region.

Situation. It is March, 1999. The Yugoslavia of Marshal Tito has disintegrated. Only two republics of the original six remain: Serbia and Montenegro. The other four, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia are sovereign. Kosovo, a province of Serbia, but with an ethnic Albanian (muslim) majority, has become the site of increasingly violent secessionist activities, with autonomy, leading to independence or absorption into a Greater Albania, as the ultimate political goal of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Ethnic Serbs (christians) view Kosovo as a vital cultural and religious region, and will not entertain notions of independence. The Yugoslavian Army has engaged in a low-grade campaign to rid the province of the KLA guerrilla fighters. But to CNN's audience, it looks of like ethnic cleansing. Perhaps in pursuit of his vision for an ethnically pure greater Serbia, or perhaps in response to the threatening rhetoric of the United States and her NATO allies, President Slobodan Milosevic has massed troops on the border of Kosovo, and is poised to crush the secessionists and displace the remaining Albanian Kosovars through the use of military force.

Issue. Should America intervene, and if so how?



The Realism Model. A realist evaluating the situation recognizes United States interests in the area, primarily the preservation of regional stability<sup>7</sup> and NATO credibility, and the risk that is posed to those interests if President Milosovic is permitted to achieve his objectives. However, as diplomatic measures fail, a realist takes a hard look at the risks of more direct – military – intervention. At risk is the principle of sovereignty: the area of conflict lies entirely within the boundaries of a sovereign nation state, and any nation state would be expected to deal with a threatening insurrection appropriately. Also at risk would be the lives of any American service personnel who would participate in such an operation. Finally, realist would recognize that even with the potential for the conflict to spill over Serbian borders, it would remain at worst a regional issue, with little or no threat to *vital* American national security interests. The introduction of forces from a hegemonic actor such as the United States would further destabilize the regional balance of power and run the risk of raising the stakes to global proportions.

Ultimately, the realist would see the benefit of American intervention in some form, but he would also find the risks associated with direct intervention too high. He would opt instead to contribute to the restoration of the regional balance of power via a low cost, low risk, low profile strategy of diplomatic and persuasive measures administered through our regional allies. Contributions to any regional *peacekeeping* force would be minimal. While a realist values the opportunity to enhance relations with our European allies, he would rue the fact that our continued membership in NATO, ostensibly an alliance developed to preserve the *global balance of power*, had come to involve America in yet another backwater regional brushfire.

The Liberalism Model. The liberal perspective on this situation is quite different.

The liberal finds that the current sequence of events, and potential outcomes, compels direct and immediate U.S. intervention. The primary threat a liberal sees is to our humanitarian interests: America cannot, while we have the means to act, fail to intervene while the world bears witness to the slaughter and displacement of tens of thousands of innocent civilians. A liberal also sees in Kosovo a threat to our interest in spreading and cultivating democracy: that it is America's unique responsibility to support and uphold democracy, or at representational government, wherever it is sustainable. Finally, in the liberal's globalistic view, no conflicts are truly regional. All conflicts are disruptive to the global security and prosperity, so it is in the collective interests of all parties involved to restore, and if necessary enforce, a stable and prosperous peace. Of course, the liberal also sees the opportunity to enhance and expand the post cold war credibility and role of the UN and NATO.

Opportunities and Risks: Both models underscore the urgency of restoring stability to the region. The realism model exposes the shorter-term risks of American intervention, most significantly the potential for the conflict to escalate beyond a regional one, a risk which is discounted by the liberal model of international relations. But it also exposes the longer-term opportunity to strengthen our relations with our regional allies, and perhaps even with Russia. The liberalism model exposes the short term opportunity to stop the killing, but it also highlights the longer-term opportunities, most specifically the opportunity to enhance collective security through continued reinforcement of democratic principals and values, an opportunity which is discounted under the realism model.

Implications for American Statecraft. President Clinton accepted the realist risk that direct US military intervention could precipitate a global crisis, in order to achieve the liberal and humanitarian imperative of putting an end to the ethnic cleansing. He mitigated that risk, however, by taking ground troops "off the table," by acting only within the NATO alliance, and by maintaining open and active diplomatic channels with Russia and China. He accepted the realist risk to American credibility posed by acting militarily within the boundaries of a sovereign nation state, in order to exploit the liberal opportunity to enhance the post-cold war credibility of NATO. He mitigated that risk by demonizing President Milosevic and undermining the legitimacy of his rule in Kosovo, leveraging the courts of world opinion at the UN, CNN, and elsewhere.

A perfect strategy? No. Did the strategy work? Perhaps. The Kosovars, at least those who survive, have the opportunity to return to what is left of their homes. Still, I expect that both the pure realist and the pure idealist would argue that the strategy *failed* precisely because it was a compromise strategy. The idealist will argue that our intervention was inadequate – that too many innocent lives were lost and too much of the country was destroyed to declare certain victory. The realist will agree that compromise brought on failure – that the inadvertent bombing of the Chinese Embassy and the confrontation between Russian and NATO troops put global American interests recklessly at risk, and that our troops are once again indefinitely and irresponsibly committed to preserve a regional peace.

To the pragmatist however, the issue isn't outcome, it is method. And even as events unfolded, it was plainly evident that pragmatism prevailed. President Clinton demonstrated that he was not blindly wedded to any one particularly rigid international

affairs ideology. Instead, he was well advised on a broad range of intervention options, and he carefully and deliberately considered the opportunities, risks, and consequences of each (including, but not limited to, those illuminated by the idealism and realism models), before deciding on an actionable strategy.

Hence the choice posed in essay question #1 – realist or idealist? – is a false one. To succeed in today's dynamic international environment, American leaders must be practicing pragmatists. True pragmatism is difficult. It requires of the statecraft practitioner a well-developed intellect, discipline, and an open mind. The statesman's toolbox must be robust, but manageable. New models that more clearly expose relevant opportunities or risks must be validated and added to the toolbox. Redundant models, or models which add only marginally to the statesman's capabilities, can be safely set aside. Models which have become obsolete must be discarded. It is indeed possible that one day mankind will realize the dream of Einstein and Hawking, and prove the existence of a Grand Unifying Theory which explains all physical phenomena. Until then, we'll continue to rely on the imperfect (but useful) wave and particle models to study light phenomena. And so it is with international affairs.

In this paper, I have argued that the choice between idealism and realism, or liberalism and realism, or between any set of competing international relations philosophies is a false choice. I have demonstrated that while no one model of international relations is correct, or even adequate, the broad family of models can prove quite useful. I have argued that the true value of any new international relations model lies in its practical consequences: the ability of the model to expose previously unknown

or ill-considered opportunities and risks. Such a philosophy for measuring the value of a model is inherent in the method of *pragmatism*.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald R. Barr and Peter W. Zehna, *Probability: Modeling Uncertainty* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1983), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1998; reprint, Washington D.C.: National Defense University, 1999, p. 31 (page citations are to the original edition).

<sup>3</sup> Henry Kissinger, "The Hinge: Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson," Chapter Two in *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994; reprint, Washington D.C.: National Defense University, 1999, p. 46 (page citations are to the original edition)).

<sup>4</sup> Walt, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> *The Works of William James*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> The White House, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, October 1998), p. 38.